

Citation: Shevchuk-Kliuzheva, O. (2020). The sociolinguistic aspect of Ukrainian Russian child bilingualism on the basis of a survey of Ukrainian families. *Cognitive Studies / Études cognitives*, 2020(20), Article 2323.
<https://doi.org/10.11649/cs.2323>

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THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC ASPECT OF UKRAINIAN RUSSIAN CHILD BILINGUALISM ON THE BASIS OF A SURVEY OF UKRAINIAN FAMILIES

Abstract

The article explores the linguistic situation in Ukraine, where a key sociolinguistic peculiarity is the large-scale spread of various types of Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism. A special focus is put on bilingualism among children speaking two closely related languages, which represents a current language situation beyond any historical or political context. The article describes the peculiarities of the formation of child bilingualism, which are a result of the changing priorities of the primary and secondary tools of communication. The article presents the findings of a survey covering the family environment, undertaken in order to identify key trends in children’s speech in Ukraine. This knowledge subsequently allows for the tracing of the correlation between a mother tongue / parents’ second language, the language of family communication, and the national language in Ukraine. Moreover, it helps when it comes to the decision of whether or not to introduce bilingual practices in the early stages of the linguistic personality formation of a child. The concept of a ‘bilingual linguistic personality’ is covered, and certain aspects pertaining to how bilingual children perceive the world are listed. The article takes into consideration the issues and criteria of the ‘mother tongue’ concept in bilingual settings. The notion of ‘linguistic code switching’ is characterized, as well as its impact on the formation of bilingual communicative competence in children. A focus is laid on the use of mixed forms of Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism in the context of the communicative practices of bilingual children. The article also examines a peculiar type of bilingualism, typical of a certain category of bilingual pre-schoolers and primary school children, in which each party of a communicative act tends to preserve their dominant language in an informal setting.

Keywords: linguistic situation; bilingualism; mother tongue; dominant language; child’s communicative competence; code switching; language mix (surzhyk)

1 Introduction

Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism is a widespread phenomenon in Ukraine. The situation with regard to linguistic practices in the territory of Ukraine has hardly undergone any quantitative changes

for several decades. It manifestly reflects gaps in the linguistic policy of an independent Ukraine and reveals inadequate language planning, since the language issue in Ukraine is often the subject of political disagreement, and causes confrontation between different sections of society. The major objective of this article is to present and analyse the results of a survey concerning the language situation of Ukrainian children. It reflects the current linguistic situation beyond the historical and political context. Childhood bilingualism studies focus on the peculiarities of children's speech activity in the process of socializing in a monolingual or multilingual society. The phenomenon is underexplored in Ukrainian linguistics. The basis for the research stems from fundamental works by L. Vygotsky, Ch. Osgood, V. Lambert, and J. M. Meisel (Vygotskiĭ, 1983; Lambert, 1972; Meisel, 2004, 2011, 2018). They present a detailed and in-depth analysis of the functioning of more than one language in a community, and its impact on the development of the speech competence of bilingual children.

The material analysed in this article is based on the data from a large-scale survey of Ukrainian families with children. Questionnaires for parents were conducted from May to July 2019 via internet in order to collect data on children's primary tool of communication. The research encompassed a wide geographical space: it covered over a hundred places, including villages and small towns as well as regional capitals. Since most respondents represented Ukraine's major cities (those with a population of over 200,000), with 630 adult representatives of Ukrainian families raising children, the overall objective of this paper is to show the linguistic situation mostly in Ukraine's large cities through the self-identification of the language of family communication. The largest numbers of respondents came from the city of Kyiv, Kyiv oblast, Odessa, Kherson, Mykolayiv, Vinnytsia, Kramatorsk, Mariupol, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Uzhgorod, Zhytomyr, Cherkasy, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, and Dnipro. In total, the survey engaged 756 respondents raising children aged from 0 to 17–18. The territorial coverage represents all of Ukraine's macro regions, with their different historical and socio-cultural peculiarities. This allows for a discussion about the general national trends shaping child linguistic collectives, with a changing priority of primary and secondary tools of communication. Moreover, such a discussion provides an opportunity to better understand the speech development of bilingual Ukrainian children. For most of the respondents participating in the survey, Ukrainian is their native language (53.5%), while 18.3% of the respondents declared Russian as their mother tongue. 21.1% of the respondents believe that both Ukrainian and Russian are their native languages. The replies to the question "What is your native language?" provided by adults correlate with the linguistic situation in their families, which is the child's language(s) of communication. This issue will be discussed further in greater detail.

2 The linguistic setting for a bilingual child: primary and secondary tools of communication

As is known, the majority of people in the world can be attributed to the category of bilinguals or multilinguals. This is certainly a positive phenomenon, confirmed by numerous studies undertaken in recent years. Some of these studies involved scanning human brains, which has helped many researchers to reach conclusions about the many cognitive and intellectual advantages of bilingualism (Armon-Lotem et al., 2015) (However, it should be stated that such experiments intended to focus primarily on individual rather than large-scale bilingualism). On the other hand, little research have been done on bilingual combinations of Slavic languages (there are more works on Romance or Germanic languages). Therefore, the generally accepted positive impact of individual bilingualism and multilingualism has not been perceived in reference to Ukrainian–Russian and Russian–Ukrainian bilingualism in various age groups in Ukraine, including children.

In terms of one's linguistic and communicative competences, the significance of the native language cannot be overestimated. When defining the 'mother tongue' concept, it is common to consider the following criteria: the order of learning languages, ethnic origin, the language of the society, and the level of language proficiency. Scholars who study language contacts, following

Weinreich (1953), sometimes underestimate the first criterion. More important is the second criterion. On the other hand, criteria three and four are variable. However, they should still be taken into account since their impact on the further formation of linguistic identity may be significant. Whereas in a primary and secondary tool of communication a child does not find any discrepancies in linguistic terms, the issue of a mother tongue may be contested or debatable. The problem is particularly acute when one analyses the situation of the simultaneous learning and/or acquiring of two languages in early childhood. Which language will be considered the mother tongue in this case? The question may produce several answers. There is every likelihood that a child may master two or three languages at the same time. In that case, a certain prioritization is constructed. Bilinguals identify their maternal language as their mother tongue. This position is reflected in terminology (mother tongue). When learning two languages, it is important to consider the factor of language entrenchment in the brain. In other words, it is about the degree of language acquisition, since the best known language requires the least cognitive effort for a speaker. The concept of entrenchment is contingent on its individual dominance, when a speaker prefers to speak the language. As a rule, the most entrenched language is preferred. However, it depends on the communicative context of a child (for instance, staying in a group with other children). Thus, a less entrenched language may be dominant for a period of time (Birdsong, 2014).

There is another stance which states that the question about the mother tongue of a bilingual child should be addressed to children when they are able to consciously perceive their linguacultural identity (Chirsheva, 2014). As mentioned above, adults who participated in the internet survey are raising children of different age groups, from 0 to 18. This broad age category has not been divided into segments, as the major objective of the survey was to find out about the linguistic situation within the family circle of communication. The findings may show general national trends. The task of parents as representatives of the primary tool of communication in the situation of bilingualism is to think of linguo-didactic strategies intended to help their child achieve a balanced form of bilingualism. The question “Have you made a decision about the linguistic strategy in raising your child?” had 67.9% of the respondents saying “yes.” Within this set of data, one can distinguish a group of respondents of 21.7% who opted for a bilingual model in raising their child, since these parents reported that the major languages for the communication of their children were Ukrainian and Russian. In terms of a strategy of linguistic education, a clear distinction should be made between the national linguistic education strategy for Ukrainian children, and an individual (family) strategy. While the national linguistic education strategy is determined by the government (who are also responsible for its efficiency), an individual strategy is introduced on the primary tool of communication level, i.e. by parents. An individual linguistic education strategy is a system of practical means and approaches that are used to master a language(s), and shape the skills of productive speech activity (speaking practices).

Children who master two languages simultaneously learn about the surrounding reality through both of them. Initially, languages have the same function for a child. First they have a cognitive function and later a communicative function. A correct interpretation of the non-monolingual situation in Ukraine assumes even more relevance of psycholinguistic peculiarities in shaping a child’s bilingual linguistic identity. When mastering a second language (and consequently, the associated culture), we often talk about the formation of a new identity, unified in its duality and mutually enriched due to joining another conceptual system of representing the world. However, Ukrainian-Russian bilinguals are in a different situation, which may cause some problems. On the other hand, it also yields benefits, since most bilingual Ukrainian children do not perceive their dominant Russian language as a sign of belonging to Russian culture or the Russian nation, unless they are part of the Russian ethnic minority. No less important is the issue of the worldview of bilingual Ukrainian-Russian children. Their perception of the world is different when shaped through a language that is not fully used in society. It may be assumed that for many bilingual Ukrainian-Russian children one picture of the world is represented by two languages, or by two simplified language codes, depending on the communicative situation. This scenario certainly impacts on the full-scale usage of each contact language, since the ongoing switching of language codes off-

sets the relevance of the language used to perform a communicative act. Subsequently, it leads to the development of a peculiar expression of ‘two-sided’ bilingualism, in which each party of the communicative act uses their language but understands their interlocutor (Lincoln, 1979). With the help of the direct ‘participant’ observation method, it may be stated that bilingual Ukrainian pre-schoolers and primary school children (aged 5–7) often display dual-lingual bilingualism in informal communication, in which the key precondition is to reach the content-based communicative objective, rather than focus on the form of an utterance. This is why communication parties find it more comfortable and easier not to switch language codes, but rather to stay within their dominant languages. This fact implies a high proficiency level of each contact language.

Considering the issue of communicative competence through the lens of the status of Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism can provide a general picture of the collective skills and abilities of children who have to constantly remain in a bilingual situation. This situation may not always be balanced and is characterized by frequent language code switching. Interpreting a child’s communicative competence, including certain communicative skills, leads to the conclusion that the concept of ‘communicative competence’ is broader than the concept of ‘linguistic competence’. In addition to the mastery of grammar and vocabulary, it also provides for the awareness of settings and situations in which the speech act is occurring (Hymes, 1971). It is obvious that the concepts of ‘language’ and ‘communicative competence’ are interdependent. In other words, the linguistic competence of an individual *a priori* determines his communicative skills. Thus, linguistic competence is an individual dynamic category that reflects the unity of language and thought, i.e. it is the ability of speakers to use the knowledge of the learned language in their communicative practice. A bilingual child’s communicative competence suggests its ability to perform speech activity to provide for efficient and effective communication in two languages, as far as active bilingualism is concerned. The competence in both languages may be on approximately the same level, as “children exposed to two or more languages from birth have been shown to be able to develop more than one native competence” (De Houwer, 1995, pp. 219–250). The most complicated factor in shaping the Ukrainian–Russian bilingual competence of children is in the lack of an element of systematic learning. Instead, children are learning Russian spontaneously, when in direct contact with Russian speakers.

3 Results

The development of speech in children, whether bilingual or non-bilingual, is influenced by the linguistic situation in a family, and by the linguistic behaviour of parents as representatives of the primary tool of communication. It is obvious that an important factor for the formation, or lack thereof, of a child’s bilingualism is the adults’ monolingualism or bilingualism. Thus, when identifying a mother tongue for respondents, it was revealed that the majority of the surveyed Ukrainians declared Ukrainian as their mother tongue (53.5%). For 18.3% it is Russian, and 21.1% of respondents deem Ukrainian and Russian as equally important native languages. About 5% of respondents identified mixed Ukrainian–Russian speech, or Surzhyk, as their mother tongue.

Parents’ native language	
Ukrainian	53.5%
Russian	18.3%
Ukrainian and Russian	21.1%
Surzhyk	4.9%

When describing the sociolinguistic peculiarities shaping children’s speech in Ukraine, attention should be paid to the fact that there is a sustainable group among the adult and child population who declare mixed forms of Ukrainian–Russian speech, Surzhyk, as their native and

dominant language. Figures showing the use of mixed speech by respondents and their children are almost coincident on several items. The score is approximately 4.5 to 5.5% of the total number of respondents. This is indicative of the neutral attitude towards the mixed form of bilingualism due to its long-term use by different population groups, awareness of the peculiarities of this situation, and from the unwillingness to change the form of bilingualism, since it requires investing a certain amount of effort.

Surzhyk as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon has been extensively covered by the academic community, including Ukrainian scholars and international linguists. Research works by O. Serbenska (Serbenska, 1994), L. Masenko (Masenko, 2009, 2011), V. Trub (Trub, 2000), L. Bilaniuk (Bilaniuk, 1997), G. Hentschel (Hentschel et al., 2007), S. Del Gaudio (Del Gaudio, 2012), P. Levchuk (Levchuk, 2015; Lewczuk, 2016) highlight different aspects and characterize bilingualism in general, and its mixed form (code-mixing) in particular. They describe the essence and nature of Surzhyk, as well as providing qualitative and quantitative research of the linguistic concept.

Language of communication in the family	
Ukrainian	49.7%
Russian	19.9%
Ukrainian and Russian	17.9%
Surzhyk	5.5%

A positive aspect of the complex linguistic situation in Ukraine is the fact that almost half of the respondents identified Ukrainian as the basic language of children's speech (49.7%). This indicator is coincident with the definition of the dominant language for a family in general — for 49.7% of the respondents it is Ukrainian. Therefore, it may be stated that the introduction of an individual linguistic education strategy for a large share of the population is a strategy of the Ukrainian language approach to raising children. Most parents simulate a situation on the level of primary tool of communication in such a way so that their children can be monolingual, speaking Ukrainian. After all, only 17.9% of the respondents selected both Ukrainian and Russian. Moreover, they obviously tried to shape the coordinate bilingualism and the skills of switching linguistic codes. Additionally, it was revealed that 19.9% of the respondents declared Russian as their main language of communication in the family. Bilingualism in children with the mixed form of bilingualism raises an important question regarding the modification of linguistic behaviour. 34.7% of Ukrainian children, according to their parents participating in the survey, display frequent switching of language codes between Ukrainian and Russian in their everyday communication. On the other hand, 23.5% may change their dominant language to the interlocutor's language, contingent on the context. In other words, it can be seen that 58.2% of the children belong to the category of active Ukrainian–Russian bilinguals; they alternately, simultaneously or alternately-simultaneously use the two related languages within one communicative setting. It is obvious that such linguistic behaviour among children will occur with the introduction of teaching methods adequate to their needs and aimed at the stimulation of coordinate bilingualism, rather than mixed.

Can your child switch to another language for communication (Ukrainian / Russian) (when talking to people other than family (other children, adults)?	
Yes	34.7%
No	33.6%
Sometimes (contingent on the situation)	23.5%

Special attention should be paid to the introduction of corrective practices for the linguistic behaviour of children with mixed bilingualism, caused by the frequent switching of language codes.

A special role should be allocated to the educational system of preschools and schools. Instead, the Ukrainian school system avoids any specific actions or clear methodological recommendations with regards to working with children from the category of Ukrainian–Russian bilinguals: the form of bilingualism of such children is not being identified in any manner; nor is the level of knowledge and communicative capacity of each contact language analysed; the issue of language stability has not been introduced into the system of modern communicative methods of learning in Ukrainian schools.

4 Conclusions

The quantitative parameters of interactions between Ukrainian and Russian, among both the adult and child population, testify to the large-scale nature of contact-based Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism in Ukraine, specifically of its different types and forms. It is a major peculiarity which has an impact on the shaping of the Ukrainian children speech.

The survey among adults raising children of different age groups, from pre-schoolers to school graduates, shows that Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism is a widespread phenomenon, both among adults, and among children. Children frequently switch their linguistic codes, which testifies to their bilingual linguistic competency. The communicative capacity of the two cognate languages is confirmed by the fact of the widespread unbalanced form of Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism among Ukrainian children, with elements of mixing contact languages. Most adults answered affirmatively to the question “Does your children’s Ukrainian speech include mistakes influenced by Russian?” The share of positive responses is 78.3%. The data shows the need to introduce corrections into the linguistic behaviour of children (depending on the age group). This is to incentivize the spread of the coordinative form of bilingualism, as opposed to the mixed form (code-mixing). Moreover, further research is needed into the linguistic peculiarities of bilingual children’s speech in Ukraine at different stages of development.

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The publication was financed at the author’s expense.

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences

Publishing History: Received 2020-07-01; Accepted 2020-09-01; Published 2020-12-23.